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SUBJECT: FRENCH THINKING ON LEBANON PRIOR TO THE ARAB SUMMIT IN DAMASCUS

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Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The French MFA has publicly repeated its concern over the continuing political impasse in Lebanon but seems to have few ideas about what to do next to elect a new president or address the what appears to be an increasingly tense situation in that country. DAS-equivalent for the Levant Ludovic Pouille reiterated French concerns that the Syrians were merely playing for time and were confident that the upcoming Arab summit in Damascus would focus more on the situation in Gaza than on Lebanon. Returning to French/EU refusal to send COMs to attend the March 14 commemorative event in Beirut, Pouille emphasized French support for the Siniora government more than support for March 14 as a political movement. FM Kouchner is thinking about returning to Beirut after the summit to resume what he sees as a broken down intra-Lebanese dialogue. Pouille proposed U.S./French consultations on Lebanon after the Damascus summit and organizing another Friends of Lebanon gathering on the margins of the late April Iraq neighbors meeting in Kuwait. During his recent visit to Lebanon, Pouille was satisfied that UNIFIL is doing a good job but Hizballah is also prepared for another battle with Israel. Fear of a regional war is rife, although Hizballah officials denied any desire to replay the 2006 conflict with Israel. Pouille explained French thinking about delaying the formal creation of the Special Tribunal, arguing that UNIIIC chairman Bellemare was not ready to bring indictments and needed the Chapter VII power at his disposal under UNIIIC. End summary

¶2. (C) French MFA DAS-equivalent for Levant affairs Ludovic Pouille told us March 18 that France continued to see no immediate prospect for a breakthrough in resolving the ongoing political impasse in Lebanon. The MFA expected no movement in electing a president when the Lebanese parliament was scheduled to meet March 25. Waiting for the Arab summit in Damascus March 29-30 was one reason, according to Pouille, but the Syrians' determination to play for time to wear down the Siniora government and state institutions, like the army, remained the main reason. Based on his recent trip to the region (see below for more information), Pouille was more convinced that waiting for a new U.S. administration to take office was another key reason for Damascus to block any forward movement on electing a president and keeping the overall political situation uncertain.

¶3. (C) The French expect the summit to largely meet minimal Syrian definitions of success: sufficient senior attendance to counter any impression that Damascus is isolated and primary attention paid to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict to attenuate any pressure regarding Syrian policy in Lebanon. Pouille claimed that French information indicated that most Arab leaders would attend, or at least a number comparable to the historical average at such summits. Discounting usual no-shows like the King of Morocco and the Sultan of Oman, the only significant absence was likely to be Saudi King Abdallah (whom Pouille thought a week ago would be represented by Turki al-Faisal). Pouille said the French did not rule out Egyptian President Mubarak attending, although he could still send his prime minister or some lower ranking official. Most damaging, in his view, were indications that Iraqi President Talabani, Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas, and Jordanian King Abdallah would attend.

¶4. (C) With respect to Lebanese attendance, Pouille said the French were still waiting for a decision. He understood the cabinet was supposed to reach some sort of decision imminently. (Note: Pouille was speaking before the GOL's March 26 announcement that it would boycott the summit. End note) Pouille said the GOF was leaving the decision entirely up to the Lebanese, although he added that French COM Andre Parant had told Siniora not to be pressured by false deadlines and to take his time figuring out whether Lebanon should attend and whom best to send. Paris was aware of the various rumors about who might attend in Siniora's stead, including former President Gemayel or Justice Minister Rizk. Regarding the latter, Pouille thought sending Rizk would be too provocative, given Rizk's association with the creation of the Special Tribunal. Pouille returned to his earlier contention that Lebanon would likely not be the main topic of discussion in Damascus to argue that this was complicating Lebanese decisionmaking on attendance.

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¶5. (C) French policy, according to Pouille, was focused very much on supporting Siniora and his government, but he indicated that French support for the March 14 political movement was not total. Returning to the French/EU decision not to send COM-level representation to the recent March 14 commemorative event in Beirut, he explained that EU COMs agreed that they needed to signal a distinction between March 14 as a political entity and its status as the majority faction in the Lebanese parliament and government. They concluded the rally was a political event and not governmental in nature. As we debated the point, Pouille reminded us that France had recently hosted Siniora as de facto head of state to underscore its support to Lebanon's legitimate government. France, however, had concerns about March 14's apparent decision to go on the political offensive for fear that it might trigger a sharp reaction by March 8 and increase the risk of instability.

¶6. (C) In this context, Pouille stated that FM Kouchner was thinking seriously about "making another pilgrimage" to Beirut after the Arab summit. Kouchner has concluded that the intra-Lebanese dialogue he felt he had restarted last summer in Celle Saint-Cloud has broken down and may require new French intervention to resume. Pouille stressed that this was still only under discussion and observed that the post-summit period might be a good time for the U.S. and France to review where the situation in Lebanon seems to be headed and coordinate next steps. He wondered as well about the possibility of organizing another "Friends of Lebanon" meeting in the weeks ahead, perhaps on the margins of the late April "neighbors of Iraq" meeting in Kuwait. Pouille opined that it would be easier taking advantage of an already scheduled gathering like that than trying to organize something separately.

¶7. (C) Pouille and the French A/S-equivalent for IO

affairs, Sylvie Bermans, visited Lebanon recently primarily to consult with Lebanese and UN officials about UNIFIL. Overall, Pouille was satisfied with what he saw and heard in terms of UNIFIL's operational status and capabilities as well as its cooperation with the Lebanese army. He said the joint patrols are going well and proving effective in terms of maintaining a constant presence that serves to keep Hizballah and other armed elements out of the zone between the Litani River and the Lebanese border with Israel. Hizballah was keeping its personnel -- and weapons -- north of the Litani. Pouille said Hizballah cited the infiltration of jihadists into Palestinian camps as the primary security concern in the area. He claimed that Hizballah maintains close watch over the camps and regularly reports to Lebanese military intelligence through liaison channels it has established.

¶8. (C) Talk of possible war is widespread, Pouille continued, especially among residents of the south along the Israeli border. He described the prevailing attitude as fatalistic rather than panicked. The trigger for a potentially imminent armed conflict was some sort of Hizballah riposte in response to the presumed Israeli assassination of Hizballah official 'Imad Mughniyah. Pouille claimed that many Lebanese believe the U.S. administration will also likely launch a military strike against Iran during the fall presidential campaign season. Syria would be part of any Israeli conflict involving Lebanon, thus leading to a wider war. Pouille stressed this was not GOF thinking but a distillation of the views he heard during his visit to Lebanon.

¶9. (C) Pouille referred to a meeting he had with Nawaf Musawi, Hizballah's international affairs liaison and Hizballah's key official interlocutor with the French embassy in Beirut. Musawi told Pouille that Hizballah was rearmed and ready for another conflict with the Israelis but not eager to initiate it. Hizballah intended, however, to retaliate for Mughniyah's death and would do so in a manner, place, and time of its choosing.

¶10. (C) In a brief discussion of the status of the Special Tribunal, Pouille indicated that France is thinking that a rush toward creating the Tribunal and disestablishing the Commission would be a mistake. He recounted recent conversations the GOF had with UNIIIC chief Daniel Bellemare in which Bellemare asked for French help in providing

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information he could use as investigative leads in support of future indictments. It was clear to the French, according to Pouille, that Bellemare would not have enough evidence to file indictments before the end of the UNIIIC mandate in June. The French are worried as well that "Damascus would close the doors to Bellemare" and refuse any cooperation with him once he begins his work as prosecutor for the Special Tribunal. The GOF view is that it would be best to prolong the UNIIIC and hold off creating the Special Tribunal until such time as Bellemare has what he needs to issue indictments. Pouille, who worked on the UNSCR establishing the Tribunal during his previous posting in New York, explained that the UNIIIC can compel member state cooperation under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. This would go away, he claimed, once the transition from UNIIIC to the Special Tribunal occurred.

¶11. (C) Comment: The French remain uncertain about how to push things forward in Lebanon and continue to harbor suspicions about March 14 as a coherent and credible political movement. Pouille's emphasis on GOF support for the government of Lebanon under Fuad Siniora and not ipso facto for March 14 was striking and likely reflective of majority sentiment among those working on Lebanon at the MFA. Similarly, the French have largely come to accept that the Arab summit in Damascus will go ahead pretty much as the Syrians would prefer, i.e., with a focus on Gaza, rather than as an embarrassment that highlights their interference in Lebanon. The French have typically blamed the Arabs for

failing to unite behind Lebanon and against Syria and the situation in Gaza for giving Damascus the classic pretext for diverting attention away from what it is doing in Lebanon. Pouille's essential message is that the French continue to fret about an increasingly tense situation in Lebanon but have no ideas about what to do next. As he hinted, this could lead Kouchner to another round of diplomatic improvisation. If we want to influence their thinking on steps after the Damascus summit, we should start doing so as soon as possible.

¶12. (U) LATE NOTE: French MFA press spokesperson Pascale Andreani on March 25 released the following statement to reporters after the latest postponement of Lebanese presidential elections (text to the Q's & A's is the official English translation; text after that is the embassy's unofficial translation):

We've taken note of the announcement by the speaker of the Lebanese parliament of the 17th postponement of the parliamentary session that was supposed to elect a president of the Lebanese Republic. France, with Lebanon's other partners, expresses its concern at this further postponement and the prospect of thus seeing the election delayed another four weeks.

It is now more than four months since Lebanon has had a president even though an agreement in principle was reached at the beginning of September on the election of a consensus candidate in the person of Michel Suleiman.

Just days ahead of the Arab League summit, France reaffirms the support it has provided, along with the European Union, to the plan that was unanimously adopted by the Arab League states in January, the first point of which provides for the presidential election to be held without delay. We regret that Lebanon cannot be represented at the Arab summit by a president.

Q: You have judged it useful today to make a special declaration concerning Lebanon. To what do you attribute this? Is it because of the 17th postponement?

A: It is effectively due to the 17th postponement. More than four months ago, Lebanon no longer had a president. We are a few days away from the Arab League summit and we had hoped the presidential election in Lebanon would have occurred before the start of the summit. It seems, therefore, important to recall our position.

We reaffirm our support for the Arab League plan and reaffirm our hope that Lebanon will quickly be able to have a president.

Q: Usually, you do not miss the opportunity to express your

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full support to the Siniora government.

A: Our support to the Siniora government is full and I reaffirm it since you gave me the occasion to do so.

Q: What do you think about the problem of the weakness of the representation by certain Arab countries at this summit in Damascus? Will this pose a problem later, i.e., when the French or French/Arab initiative is resumed? What could be the fallout for Lebanon?

A: I do not today have all the details about who will represent whom at the Arab League summit. Let's wait to see how it unfolds and not draw pessimistic conclusions.

